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151157Z Jun 05

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 002706

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: WOMEN'S RACE TO THE BALLOT BOX

1. (U) SUMMARY: A UAE COLUMNIST CALLS FOR EQUAL RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS FOR ARAB WOMEN IN SOCIETY. SHE STATED THAT THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION OF ARAB SOCIETIES WILL BE COMPLETE ONLY WHEN WOMEN ATTAIN EQUAL RIGHTS. SHE CALLS FOR GREATER ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND INCREASED POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AS A MEANS TO ATTAIN THESE RIGHTS.

2. (U) Najla Al-Rostamani, Associate Editor for Dubai-based English daily "Gulf News" (circulation 95,000) wrote an op/ed stating:

"The image thus far portrayed has been of women as suppressed entities, oppressed wills and voices, curtailed freedoms and denied rights. The question of course is not just what is meant by the "suppressed", "oppressed", "curtailed" and the "denied". The question is also of "where is the truth in all this and where lies the rhetoric"...Looking at democratic experiments in other countries, it is interesting to note that in those countries of the Western world, political democracies have been established long before women were granted political rights. And even when the basis of a political process has been laid, a selected few had the right to be part of it. But it is also interesting to note that studies have shown that only when women had fully attained their rights as citizens, was the democratic process complete. Both had progressed in tandem...This brings us to the crux of the whole matter. Throughout the whole debate in the Arab world, the dominant argument was that numbers matter the most the higher the number of women in politics, the better. But numbers alone do not mean anything. What really needs to be studied is whether the authority given is in proportion to that enjoyed by men. The key point here is of rights on equal basis as citizens, whether men or women. In other words, equal rights and obligations under the law as citizens of a nation. The real question is of the role played by women in shaping, formulating and influencing public policy. Perhaps the most challenging task for women is not whether they are represented under the domes of parliaments, or how many are present within the walls of assemblies. One of the most important issues facing women in the Arab world today is the lack of education, more so than the lack of political rights...The issue should not of course be seen as an either or dilemma. Neither should it be viewed as means of undermining women who have or are still at the helm of politics. At the same time, women in the Arab world do not need to limit themselves to producing Schumachers and Dettoris."

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